

Charcoal Pits
Near Lakehurst, Ocean County, New Jersey

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of New Jersey

Historic American Buildings Survey
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133 Central Avenue, Rahway, New Jersey

Charcoal Pits
Near Lakehurst, Ocean County, New Jersey

Owner:

Historical Data:

Charcoal burning at one time was a thriving industry in the pine belt of New Jersey, but the obsolete method of production has been responsible for its decline. The structural details as shown in the drawings of the survey are those that have been in use for generations.

The wood for burning is cut into 4 foot lengths and built into a symmetrical mound and covered with a layer of turf and over that sand. The only openings are a small smoke and gas vent in the apex and a larger place at the base where the kiln is fired. According to Heston, the fire is started at the top and eats its way downward to the sticks of wood. The burner must allow only sufficient air through the draft hole so that the mass of wood smoulders and does not actually ignite. It takes about a week to complete the burning after which it is necessary to prevent re-ignition from the slowly cooling mass. When a kiln is properly attended the entire wood content becomes an even mass of glowing timber. It is necessary that a constant watch be kept, and therefore a bunk is constructed facing the pit in which the watcher lies during the night to guard against intrusion or accident. As the wood settles or shrinks during the burning process, the earth covering develops cracks. These openings must be quickly closed with sand to prevent additional air vents.

The average kiln is made up of about eight to ten cords of wood which is reduced to 200 to 250 bushels of finished charcoal. About half of the

original weight is lost in the process and all by-products are lost. The coal is packed in burlap bags and trucked to nearby dealers in cities. In former days, the burner peddled his product in high boarded waggons to nearly every village.

Occasionally, one may still locate some kilns in the South Jersey pines, but few of the newer generation are being trained to follow the business of "coaling" and in a few years the burning of charcoal by the ancient pit method will be a forgotten tradition of the pines.

Bibliography:

Material from the New Jersey State Department of Conservation and Development secured by Nathaniel R. Ewan, Survey Photographer

Feston, A. M. Jersey Wagon Jaunts 2 Volumes Camden, Sinnickson Chew and Sons, n.d.

Nathan C. Root
Supervising Historian

Approved:

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m/ 8/22/51